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ABSTRACT

Since 1975, an honors course in freshman composition has been offered at Emanuel County Junior College (ECJC), a unit of the University System of Georgia, for academically superior students whose needs may not be met by the standard curriculum. The process of identifying honors students involves screening entering students to identify those who score significantly higher than the majority on the Basic Skills Examination in both reading and writing, who write a satisfactory essay, and who have high Scholastic Aptitude Test scores. Interviews are conducted with the identified students to determine whether the honors course is appropriate for them. The central objective of the course is to develop students' ability to write coherently and logically through practice in four modes of discourse in autobiographical and biographical papers. Drawing from James Moffett's "Teaching the Universe of Discourse," the course includes units in autobiography and journal writing; biography and exposition; and argumentation. The texts for this course, two autobiographies and three biographies, were chosen to illustrate the different modes of discourse, as well as to be interesting, informative, and stimulating readings. To measure the growth of writing skills which occurs during this course, three instructors holistically grade the first and last essays written in the class using a dichotomous scale. Measured gains in writing skills, along with positive student evaluations of the course and high retention rates, provide evidence of the success of the course in countering boredom and challenging the verbally superior student. (RO)

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HONORS COMPOSITION:

A POSSIBLE ALTERNATIVE IN THE TWO-YEAR COLLEGE

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Honors Composition: A Possible Alternative in the Two-Year College

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Introduction

One approach to writing in two-year colleges is the establishment of an honors curriculum for the verbally superior student. Some colleges find this addition to the curriculum too costly since so much money is needed to remediate the unprepared and to accomodate the mainstream student, the typical "two-year" college student. However, since 1975 I have worked to design an honors course in freshman composition at Emanuel County Junior College, the smallest unit in the University System of Georgia. Each fall since then, except 1983 when a teacher resigned too late to hire a replacement, the ten to fifteen who are selected represent the best students that we have enrolled. I have not only "survived the impossible" but have been challenged by these gifted students to champion their cause whenever I have the opportunity. Their needs should be met. It is a myth that only the low or average ability student enters our doors. We must be ready for all students. The course I am describing is what finally evolved by 1980--five years of trial and error preceded.

Identifying the Honors Students

The honors student is the academically superior student whose needs may not be met by the standard curriculum at an institution. The term gifted became the standard designation for persons of superior ability during the early part of the twentieth century, but it does not accurately specify a type of ability or a degree of superiority. The characteristic with which it is most commonly associated is the ability to achieve high scores on intelligence tests (Getzels and Dillon 689).

The first task is to select the participants of the class. For a course in freshman composition, a high aptitude in verbal skills would be the minimal designation of the term gifted or superior student. The demonstration of such skills would be scores on aptitude tests such as the SAT, high school averages and grades, and performances observed by the teachers. A combination of measures is needed to identify the superior student for an honors program.

The personal characteristics of the honors student vary as much as the definitions of gifted and the methods used in honors programs. However, the most distinguishing trait is individuality (Drews 27). Usually, these students have many interests, like to work by themselves, and immerse themselves in a topic of current interest (Roth and Sussman 18). Dunlap says that the gifted learn rapidly and easily, retain what they learn without much drill, show much curiosity, enjoy reading, show interest in words and ideas, reason things out, have the ability to generalize, seek older companions, possess a good sense of humor, and have a strong desire to excel. They may be poor in spelling, careless in handwriting, or inaccurate in arithmetic because they are impatient with details requiring rote learning or drill (154). Cohen adds that the superior student in higher education has a more difficult time settling on his educational and professional goals (The Superior Student 54).

With wide diversity of personality traits, it is understandable that developing programs to meet the needs of the honors student is not a simple task. Nor is it easy to establish selection criteria. This complex student is the potential honors student for which special arrangements must be made to educate him so that he reaches his potential unless we believe his needs are met by the regular curriculum.

Since the idea of having an honors course in freshman composition was first conceived, the English faculty and I at Emanuel County Junior College have re-

viewed and studied the criteria for selection.

Since 1975 Emanuel County Junior College has worked with the problem of selection. Each year found some alteration in the criteria until we determined our current policy, but it is believed that most of the current criteria are sound. However, the selection method is continually watched and evaluated. First, students are screened upon admission, and those students with 500 verbal SAT scores or higher and those with a combined SAT score of 1000 or higher are singled out. After the Basic Skills Examination is administered and the placement essay written, students who score significantly higher than the majority of the student body on the BSE in both reading and writing and who write a satisfactory essay are matched with the list of students with the high SAT scores.

An interview with the students follows. In the interview held during the first two days of the quarter the instructor determines if the demands of the class will be too great for the individual. She has the high school grade point average when she talks with each student. She attempts to ascertain what problems the student may have, particularly if his high school grades are low. These grades may indicate a lack of motivation or a lack of maturity, or there may be family conflict or a job which frustrates the candidate. Austin says that the initial interview and continuing contact, possible in the conferences and in the instructor's office hours, provide the best setting in which the student and instructor can explore the appropriateness of honors participation (169).

Two traditional measures are not used in the initial criteria: teacher recommendation and high school grades. Research also shows that the teacher assessment has been proven to correlate poorly with objective tests such as the SAT. In one school, teachers could identify only 41 of the 91 who scored in the upper two percent range on an intelligence test. This range is usually equivalent to 132 or above on the Stanford-Binet(Roth and Sussman 12-13).

There is a high correlation between intelligence tests and achievement tests such as the SAT. The SAT score is more trustworthy than any teacher recommendation.

High school grades may not reflect the potential of the student. Such bright underachievers, who often choose the two-year colleges, may have been neglected by programs which focus primarily on the intellectual development of the achieving student. These students represent a loss to society if their potential is never fulfilled (Purkey 1). The teacher of an honors class which admits these underachievers must remember their needs and work with these students so that they may develop self-confidence, learn to persevere, integrate their goals, and lose any inferior feelings (Purkey 2). Our selection process is not foolproof, but it is flexible enough to allow for the individual differences in performance and should be regarded as open for change. It like all other components of this course design is annually evaluated by the English faculty.

Rationale of the Course

While selecting the students for the honors classes is very important, designing a course in freshman composition suitable for these potential honors students is significant. The central objective of our present honors composition course is that the students demonstrate the ability to write coherently and logically. To accomplish this objective, the students are sensitized to--and given practice in--the four modes of discourse (description, narration, exposition, and argumentation) while they are writing autobiographical and biographical papers, and they read and examine as models five autobiographies and biographies. There is no rhetoric but a handbook and dictionary serve as reference tools.

The philosophical basis for such an approach is drawn from James Moffett's

Teaching the Universe of Discourse. Moffett says, "Through reading, writing, and discussing whole authentic discourses--and using no (rhetorical) textbooks--students can learn everything . . . of value in language" (7).

Moffett's writing strategy calls for a logical sequence which allows the student to move from the center of the self outward, from self-awareness to reader awareness. ("Learning to Write" 50). Accordingly, Moffett sets up four modes of discourse based on the increasing distance in time and space between the speaker and his audience (Discourse 33). The hypothesis is that speaking, writing, and reading in forms of discourse that are successively more abstract make it possible for the student to understand what is entailed at each stage of the hierarchy (Discourse 25).

Moffett's writing theory is defended on commonly perceived psychological grounds: this is the way the human mind naturally perceives the world, moving from the concrete to the abstract, from simple observation to formulation of solutions to complex problems. For this reason his theory has been useful to the design of this curriculum. Another value of his theory is that it can be applied at almost any level of education.

According to Moffett, the starting place for writing is the individual, his apprehension of his own world and of his relationship to it. Therefore, it is appropriate that the course start with the reading of autobiographies and with autobiographical writing. The journal writing which is the first assignment allows the student to write about his own conception of the world for himself. The journal, written out of class, is not required after four weeks. It is read but not graded. Free writing is encouraged. Many keep it going.

As the student writes in his journal, he reads autobiographical writing of other people. He examines exerpts from Charlton Heston's Journal and Anne Frank's Diary. After the introduction to autobiography, the student reads and discusses

the whole text of Maya Angelou's autobiography I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings. Then after examining the descriptive language of Angelou, the student composes a descriptive essay based on a real life experience. This writing like Angelou's is autobiographical, and this first essay, which is called "recording" in Moffett's Spectrum of Discourse, is an in-class essay, where the writing process is stressed. On writing days the students sit in a regular classroom pattern but on all other days we use a semicircle to expediate discussion and lecturing is kept to a minimum.

Moffett makes clear that all discourses are combined forms, but to learn, a student should undertake one at a time in order to recognize its nature. Later he learns to mix the forms himself as well as to recognize the mix in others' writing (Discourse 46). For this reason, each mode is introduced separately--first the student writes description; second, narration; third, exposition; fourth, argumentation. Description is the first mode that the student is asked to produce because the human mind naturally perceives the world concretely before it can move up the ladder of abstraction. Narration, "reporting" in Moffett's Spectrum, comes next because it conforms more closely to the temporal, spatial order in which natural phenomena occur; the logic of lowest verbal abstraction is chronologic although it represents selecting and editing of events (Discourse 34). Exposition, the third mode, which is called "generalizing" in the Spectrum, requires that the student practice abstracting on a higher level. Moffett defines abstracting as the ability to select and ignore (Discourse 27). As the student moves to the fourth mode, argumentation or "theorizing" in the Spectrum, he must abstract not only to explain but to persuade. As the student moves in this sequence, the role of the writer "decenters," and the role of the audience becomes more significant. The subject and the audience have moved beyond the internal world of the writer.

Unit one, Autobiography and Journal Writing, has as its goal becoming aware of how the individual perceives his own world. When the student reads and discusses the second autobiography, he comprehends another individual's perception of the world. After observing the chain of narrative events in this autobiography the student writes a second autobiographical paper. This essay is an exercise in the narrative mode, which calls for memory selectivity, a higher level of abstraction than perceptual selectivity (description). As the unit ends, the student will have examined two modes of discourse and will have practiced writing both.

Biography and Exposition, the second unit in the course, aims to assist the student to become aware of the nature of the world outside himself, the second stage in the "decentering" process. The introduction to biography includes a discussion of the long Playboy interview of Jimmy Carter and of some of Flannery O'Connor's letters from the collection by Sally Fitzgerald, The Habit of Being. Copies of these materials are given out on the day before the introduction. These represent the kinds of sources which biographers use, along with diaries, journals, autobiographies, and other biographies. The student sees where he can get source material for his research project, a biographical paper using all four modes of discourse, which is assigned after the first four weeks to allow time for the student to do an adequate job. The paper is due at the end of the quarter. It demonstrates the student's ability to fuse the modes which he learns separately. This independent study has been the favorite writing assignment in every section thus far. Certainly Cohen is right when he says independent projects should be an integral part of an honors course. Can you imagine the thrill when Alan Alda answered a letter sending an autographed picture along with biographical data? Yes, it happened.

For the first biography several have been used including Shooting Star by

Maurice Zolotow, a biography of John Wayne. The book presents a detailed portrait of the star and serves to open a world unfamiliar to the student in rural Swainsboro, Georgia. After examining the steps in the process of Wayne's rise to stardom, the student writes a process analysis as his first expository theme. For this essay the class is his audience, and peer evaluation is used between the writing of the rough draft and the final draft.

At this time I introduce cause and effect as a second expository technique. To develop this kind of paper, the student also produces a time-order pattern of organization. This paper is written out of class during the first official conference time. These conferences, an integral part of the design, which coincide with midterm, are held during the regular class hour and at other times if needed.

Following the days of conference, the class resumes meeting to discuss Profiles in Courage by John F. Kennedy. Definition is then considered as an expository writing strategy. I begin with Kennedy's definition of courage.

Next I introduce a fourth expository technique, actually a combination of two--analysis and classification. The student is introduced to this strategy with a discussion which brings in all four of the books previously read. All four books are used to illustrate that all modes are present to some degree in each of the works used. The subjects for this paper include topics suggested by the contents of the books and topics similar in nature to those which appear as Regents' Test topics, important for us in Georgia. This exposition, which does not call for time-order, uses some of the similar thought patterns needed in cause and effect: grouping and dividing. The topics call for some use of definition in the development of the paper.

Then I help the class understand comparison/contrast, a fifth expository technique. Usually I show the class how to make comparisons using two of the

Senators in Profiles for the raw material. Following the instruction, the class writes a comparison/contrast essay. This sixth essay, which is written in class combines the subject matter of two or more of the four books; for instance, the students may choose to compare the grandmothers of Maya Angelou and Margaret Mead or the mothers of Angelou and Russell Baker, depending, of course, on what autobiographies were read. The second unit goal, becoming aware of the nature of the world outside oneself, should be realized at the end of the emphasis on exposition.

The fourth mode, argumentation, is the subject of the final unit in the course, and it is considered the most complex. The biography Zelda by Sally Milford provides the background for the discussion of argumentation. Brodie's Thomas Jefferson and Edwards' Road to Tara have been used also. The last paper is written out of class and calls for high level abstraction. The student is told that his audience could be anyone in the world at large who may or who may not have read the five books or shared his experiences. This last exercise prepares him for two later experiences in which the need to impress a reader is obvious: at ECJC these are the final examination and the Regents' Test, both of which have multiple graders. In both instances, the student will not know who his readers are.

The last days of the course are devoted to final student-teacher conferences, evaluation, and a practice Regents' Test essay. At this time the student turns in his original biographical project--a synthesis of the modes. By this time he is aware that each of us is unique but that each of us shares similar growing experiences.

In this sequence of reading and writing assignments, each of the modes presented is more selective, more complex, more public than the previous one (Discourse 33). Moffett's theory is translated into a course design. Since

the students learn to write well or to improve their writing significantly, then the theory justifies itself in practice. I can say that the course is successful based on the evaluation by the students and the grades of his first and last essays. Evaluation too is an integral part of this design. If time permitted, I'd go into this aspect in more detail. Copies of the course outline are available for those interested.

Operational Strategies

The selection of texts for this honors course, the two autobiographies and the three biographies is executed with great care. The books chosen have to illustrate the modes of discourse as well as be interesting, informative, and stimulating readings. Biographies and autobiographies, no longer considered a poor adjunct to literature or history, offer analysis of a person's values, his emotions, his actions, and his commitments. Reading these, students gain an awareness of their similarity to other men and women who grew up with decisions, conflicts, closed doors, sacrifices, problems, lost opportunities, victories, and self-exploration; in addition, students discover that each individual is also a unique being. Such reading probably aids in their search for maturity and identity, for a more positive self-concept.

As Moffett indicates, he believes in working with "whole, authentic discourses," and Austin says that the instructor should use primary sources in an honors course.

All of the books used in ECJC's course are about Americans whose lives should be of interest for one or more reasons to most of the students. Realizing the wisdom of Bruner's spiral curriculum, I place Maya Angelou's autobiography first because it is short and easily read. Besides, her vivid description is perfect for illustrating the descriptive mode. The other

texts have changed through the years according to availability in paperback, student interest, their evaluative comments, and new books on the market. The autobiographies come first because that is the nature of the first essays which the student writes about himself. Then the biographies follow as the writing shifts from the student himself as subject.

There is no rhetoric, but a dictionary and a handbook are required as tools for the student to use.

The other materials in the course have been chosen to illustrate the source material used by biographers: letters, diaries, journals, interviews.

Incorporated into this course are two conferences between student and teacher. In these conferences on a one-to-one basis the student can discuss the work, his problems, his successes. If he needs particular assistance with a grammatical item which has appeared in his writing, he can recieve instruction in the privacy of a conference. Since honors students seem to have personal problems similar to those of other students, they need an opportunity to discuss them, particularly since honors students are reluctant to seek help with their difficulties.

The classroom situation is a seminar. The chairs are arranged in a semicircle so that the students and teacher are brought together physically. In this environment discussion is encouraged, and lecturing is kept to a minimum. According to Cohen, the colloquim as used in this course is appropriate for the superior student (54).

Supplementing the course with the keeping of a journal gives the students an opportunity to experiment on their own as well as to practice writing daily. It is a period of free writing for the most part--without restrictions. The journals are checked but not graded by the instructor. The student may continue to write in his journal if he so desires, but when the class moves to biography, approximately in the fourth week, journal writing is no longer required.

The second long-range activity is the biographical research project. The student chooses his subject and then does research in the library. The student focuses on his subject at some period in the subject's life. The requirement is to include all four modes of discourse in the paper. This independent study, like the journal assignment, provides the student with an opportunity to pursue an interest and to demonstrate his knowledge of the four modes. In all of the honors classes at Emanuel County Junior College, the independent research projects have been cited as the favorite writing assignment by the majority of the students. Certainly, Cohen is correct when he says that such independent projects should be an integral element in an honors curriculum (54).

To measure the growth of writing skills which occurs during this course, three instructors holistically grade the first and last essays written in the class using a dichotomous rating scale which I prepared.

A dichotomous scale is a series of statements which can be answered yes or no. The rater decides after reading the essay whether the piece of writing contains the feature identified in the statement. Using Cohen's model found in Cooper's article on holistic evaluation but altering it to my scale matches closely with the English Department Grading Scale of the college. I constructed the dichotomous scale to use in evaluating two sets of essays. Cooper believes that it is a promising measure to use for making distinctions between sets of essays (9). Since the purpose of my evaluation is to assess improvement between two sets of essays, the dichotomous scale was selected for the evaluation of the students' ability to write coherently and logically. The three raters read independently the diagnostic essays, written on the day of the final examination ten weeks later. The number of yes grades on the final paper is significantly higher every year.

This substantial increase in the writing performance of the students on the final essays is, no doubt, at least in part attributed to the course. Also, the raters' comments on the individual students' essays add a dimension to the holistic grading not always possible with large numbers of papers. It is safe to say that Moffett's theory works in practice. The course objective is achieved: the students demonstrated significant improvement in writing.

Evaluation of Course and Instructor

Also, the students in the honors class have two opportunities to evaluate the course and the instructor. First, they participate in the college evaluation of each of their classes. The second course evaluation, a questionnaire prepared by the instructor of the honors class, is administered on the last day of the quarter. Both are anonymous assessments sealed until after all grades are in.

Although some educators have a pessimistic view of the value of student assessment, the research literature is highly supportive of the significance of student ratings as accurate reflections of student attitudes (Aleamoni 41). Apparently needs are being met at Emanuel County Junior College since by nature the honors student is perceptive, critical, and intelligent. He probably would not assess his course in such a positive manner unless he really felt this way. The results continue to be very positive on both instruments.

Though the evaluation measures indicate a successful course design, there are areas for improvement suggested by the teacher and the students. Since the real purpose of the evaluation is to improve, not just prove, these students' suggestions are considered. One reason for change in texts is students' adverse criticism. Finally, the student selection criteria must be continually studied as must the other components in the design to be certain that they are as effective as they now seem to be.

Conclusion

After the first three years 1973-1976, I made a study of the student body and found 25 students who had been or were attending Emanuel County Junior College possessing verbal SAT scores of 500 or better. Only 5 made A's in English 101, and 3 had withdrawn before the end of the first quarter. During the second course in composition, 2 more withdrew. The fact that 5 of the 25 had left college in less than six months suggested that the needs of the superior student were not being met. Thus the subsequent research and course design followed. Though the task is never finished, the course as it was taught in 1980 appears to be a good one. It took me 5 years to achieve this design. At least, no one has dropped out. To this date all students selected for the honors classes have stayed in college either at Emanuel County Junior College or at another one. In the fall of 1981 through 1985 the same course has been taught with slight alterations and then evaluated. The course still seems a workable solution to counter the boredom of and challenge the verbally superior students at Emanuel County Junior College. The course can be used elsewhere, but each school must identify its own needs and its "gifted."

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